

Aspirations of Attainment: A Critical Examination of State Policy Goals and Racial Disparities in College Completion

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Abstract

College completion has been prioritized by policymakers, foundations, and advocacy groups with the goal of increasing graduation rates across the country. To achieve this, individual states developed attainment plans to reach target milestones by years 2025, 2030, and beyond. Although states have taken on the challenge of college completion, there has been little attention placed on the racial disparities that exist in attainment. In particular, the Latinx community faces the lowest attainment rate in 34 of 50 states. Given this concern, we studied state-level attainment plans, and the discourse around racial disparities in college completion. Using Critical Policy Analysis, we found little evidence that attainment plans acknowledge or address racial disparities in general, or the glaring gaps for the Latinx community specifically. Our findings reveal that the primary discourse around college completion is an economic one, focused on improving rates to sustain and achieve workforce demands. Across attainment plans, we found three patterns of discourse—deficit-oriented, race-evasive, or race-conscious—that attempt to acknowledge inequities and take action to improve rates for the Latinx community. These findings suggest that without explicit language in these college completion efforts, racial inequities will persist and goals of improved completion cannot be achieved.

Keywords: critical policy analysis, discourse analysis, state policy, college completion, attainment plans, equity, racial disparities, Latinx inequity

Aspirations of Attainment: How State Policy Goals Fail to Address Latinx Completion Disparities

Over the last ten years increased attention has been given to the college attainment rates of the nation. Spurred by efforts like Obama's American Graduation Initiative (AGI, 2009), Lumina Foundation's (2010) Goal 2025, and Complete College America, the focus has been on increasing the number of people with high quality degrees and certificates to meet future educational demands for the nation's workforce. From these efforts, a college completion agenda emerged with a target goal of reaching 60% of the nation's adult population earning an associate's or bachelor's degree by 2020 (AGI) or 2025 (Lumina). What stands out from the Lumina (2017) plan is their acknowledgement of the following:

Goal 2025 will remain out of reach unless postsecondary attainment among African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians increases significantly. Lumina's metrics focus on increasing both enrollment and completion so that students from these groups earn at least 2.5 million of the credentials needed among traditional-aged students

As a result of this completion agenda, individual states have established policies and attainment plans to increase the number of people earning an associate's or bachelor's degree. Within these policy goals, states have developed plans to improve attainment such as "The Colorado Goal" of 66% by 2025, Kansas' "Foresight 2020" improving to 60% by 2020, or the "Drive to 55" which seeks to get 55 percent of "Tennesseans equipped with a college degree or certificate by the year 2025." The national attainment rate is over 40%, but for racially-minoritized groups these rates are much lower. Disaggregating attainment by race, we uncover large disparities in degree completion. The national attainment rate for African Americans is 30%, American Indian 24%, and Latinx 21.9% (See Appendix A). Of all racial subgroups, the Latinx population faces the largest disparities in degree attainment across the United States and in 35 states specifically.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand how states develop policy goals that address the barriers to college completion for the Latinx community and other minoritized groups. Although these plans articulate a vision for increased educational attainment, there is little evidence that the state policies, goals, and strategies developed address disparities facing racially minoritized communities, especially the Latinx community. The Education Trust recently released a report evaluating all 50 states attainment plans and how they consider gaps in completion by race (Jones & Berger, 2019). They found limited evidence that states include race-specific attainment goals, metrics, or strategies. Additionally, recent work by Gándara & Hearn (2019) highlights the process of legislating a college completion policy and the evidence used to inform the creation of a state-level attainment plan. This recent research lays the ground work for our study and helps us envision a comprehensive examination of the role of race and racial equity in states' goals for improving completion.

As the US population continues to shift and the Latinx population remains among the fastest growing ethnic groups in the country (Pew Research Center, 2016), it is imperative for state policymakers and higher education institutions to implement intentional efforts to increase educational attainment for this group. Researchers point out that states will fail to reach their attainment goals if they fail to acknowledge and address the equity gaps in attainment faced by racially-minoritized groups (Center for Urban Education, 2017). Without the explicit acknowledgment of how to support racially minoritized populations, it is extremely difficult for states to reach any aspirational goals of attainment.

This study purports that explicit action must be taken to support the Latinx population to achieve higher rates of completion. Without a race-conscious design, these state goals and

attainment plans become mere aspirations, dreams deferred to next decade moving from 2020 to 2030 and beyond. Rather than extending goals into the future, states must take into account the barriers faced by specific groups, whether they be racialized in nature, due to geographic limitations, or based on socioeconomic status. Given our study's purpose, we ask the following research questions:

1. How do state attainment plans discuss race, racial disparities, or racial (in)equity in their goals for improving college completion?
 - a. Are state attainment plans used as an opportunity to address racial inequities in college completion?
2. Do plans explicitly discuss, identify, or address ways to improve Latinx attainment rates in their state?
 - a. Do states with a large Latinx population put an emphasis on them in their attainment policy or plan?

These research questions enable us to explore how states have developed college completion policies, the discourse within attainment plans, and how these efforts address glaring racial disparities in educational attainment. As target dates such as 2020, 2025, and 2030 come and go, these questions are critical to answer for stakeholders such as state policymakers, system-leaders, institutional administrators, and the communities affected by these inequities.

State-Policy Goals, College Completion, and Racial Disparities

A national conversation has formed around college completion and ways to increase the level of attainment for working-aged adults in the United States. From political leaders to philanthropic organizations and policy think-tanks each has expressed the critical concern for

improving postsecondary attainment rates. President Obama (2009) announced the ambitious goal of having “the highest college graduation rate of any nation in the world in the next 10 years” (p. 3). Philanthropic organizations, like Lumina Foundation, have led the way stating, “the nation faces an urgent and growing need for talent. To meet that need, many more people must earn college degrees. By 2025, 60 percent of Americans hold a credential beyond high school” (Lumina, 2017). Similarly, Complete College America was established in 2009 to “dramatically [increase] college completion rates and [close] equity gaps by working with states, systems, institutions, and partners” (About, 2019). As we examine the current landscape of college completion, we discuss the origins of the imperative for improved attainment, the types of state-level policies enacted, and the progress and impact made by these attainment plans.

Rise of State Completion Policies

A clear completion agenda was created with the Lumina Foundation at the forefront, establishing a guiding imperative of achieving a “goal of 60% of adults age 25 to 64 holding degrees or certificates by 2025” (Jones & Berger, 2019, p. 2). Today, 43 states have identified college completion as a priority, passed related legislation, and established state-level attainment plans to achieve their goals. Approaches to these policies vary by state, from the priority for improving attainment (i.e., a strong workforce, civic-mindedness), completion goal set (i.e., 60%), achievement year selected (i.e., 2030), and mechanisms (i.e., addressing affordability, improving state-wide collaboration) by which states will progress and achieve their goals of improving educational outcomes for their residents.

Of the 43 states with completion initiatives, a majority have adopted the 60% goal to match the national imperative set by Lumina and Obama’s American Graduation Initiative (2009) including states like Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Rhode Island, and Texas. Across

all states the attainment rate goal ranges from 55% up to 70%. For example, Florida and its “Rise to 55” plan was established by the Florida Higher Education Coordinating Council seeking to “reach a statewide educational attainment goal of 55 percent by 2025.” Connecticut, Iowa, and Minnesota trailblaze the completion agenda by setting a goal of 70% attainment for their residents. Future Ready Iowa, established by Governor’s Executive Order, set the priority high given the rationale that “education and training beyond high school is the new minimum. By 2025, 68% of Iowa jobs will require training and education beyond high school” (FAQ, nd).

One stark difference between states and their completion goals is the timeline established to reach their attainment aspirations. Examining state policies and attainment plans, it is critical to note how quickly these dates and targets are approaching. The selected year to achieve attainment goals were clustered into three targets: 2020, 2025, and 2030. For instance, Georgia along with Illinois, intend to achieve their attainment goal by 2025 while Idaho, Kansas, and Massachusetts have each selected a more aggressive timeline of 2020. While states have similar agendas in achieving a higher rate of attainment, the ways by which they hope to accomplish this varies from state to state.

Progress and Influence of State Completion Policies

Individual states have taken their efforts and published state attainment plans that detail specific initiatives from funding efforts to institutional recommendations for universities, community colleges, and even business partners in some instances. Arizona, for example, utilized support from the “Governor’s Office of Education, Helios Education Foundation, Maricopa County Community College District, and the Arizona Board of Regents” in order to develop their attainment percentage of 60% and their deadline of 2030 (AchieveAZ, 2019, p.4). Texas, in comparison, utilized their already established Texas Higher Education Coordinating

Board which “was created by the Texas Legislature in 1965 to represent the highest authority in the state in matters of public higher education” (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2019). This board was able to create and disseminate an attainment plan specific to Texas that would increase the attainment rate of the state to their required metrics for economic success. These plans are of utmost importance to this study as our efforts were to investigate how and if these plans utilize a racialized context for specific populations and if efforts were developed to support minoritized students, specifically, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students. Since the inception of these efforts, a decade of time has passed allowing researchers an opportunity to investigate how and if these populations are specifically acknowledged. As we situate our study within a broader conversation of college completion, we reviewed recent research to help us understand if and how racially minoritized students benefit from state completion policies.

In recent years, scholars have begun to investigate the way in which some state plans attempt to “increase achievement and educational attainment for all along the educational pipeline, especially students of color” (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016, p. 3). For example, Mansfield and Thachik (2016) conducted a critical policy analysis on Texas’ completion plan, “Closing the Gaps 2015,” and found that the attainment plan aimed to increase access and achievement for racially-minoritized students on paper, but fell “short of addressing systemic inequities such as enduring segregation and unconstitutional school finance policy” (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016, p. 23). To continue inquiry on Texas’ completion efforts, Gándara and Hearn (2019) interviewed 32 individuals “involved in higher education policymaking to examine the development of college-completion policy in the state” (p. 3). Though found a heavy influence of commerce and business driving the adoption of Texas’ college completion policy efforts as well as limited conversation on race and racial disparities in attainment. These pieces highlight the

way that completion policies focus less on individual students and more on the benefits of the degree to the state. This focus on improving completion, in the aggregate, limits the ability to discuss, identify, or address specific barriers facing racial groups. With the Latinx population nearly 40% of the population in Texas, omitting racial disparities in attainment limits the ability of this completion policy to achieve its stated intent (US Census, 2020).

Examining how the completion agenda incorporated racially-minoritized students to improve attainment, Teranishi and Bezbatchesko (2015) found that most reforms recently enacted lacked any discussion of racial disparities as well as failed to include specific efforts to redress inequities faced by these communities. Their critique of the completion agenda continues: “without an explicit approach to address these specific barriers, disparities between groups will persist, inhibiting progress for our higher education system as a whole” (Teranishi & Bezbatchesko, 2015, p. 251). Reviewing recent scholarship (Gandara & Hearn, 2019; Jones & Berger, 2019; Mansfield & Thachik, 2016), there is a clear understanding that state policies seeking to improve completion need to be further examined to understand how they discuss and address the disparities facing communities of color. As a national concern, we seek to understand the ways these plans discuss and address the barriers specifically facing the Latinx community in attainment. As the largest and fastest growing racial group in the country that also faces stark gaps in college completion its necessary to turn our attention to how attainment plans benefit, harm, or omit the Latinx community in their goals to improve state-wide and national completion. Continuing the effort put forth by these researchers, it is of utmost importance to ensure that efforts looking at attainment rates include a “critical lens to examine the distinctive impact” of these policies (Teranishi & Bezbatchesko, 2015, p. 252). For this reason, we draw on

Critical Policy Analysis to guide our exploration of the ways attainment plans identify, discuss, and address attainment for the Latinx community.

Theoretical Framework

We build on the traditions of Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) to investigate how state policy goals and attainment plans consider, discuss, or address issues of race, racism, and racial inequities within their reforms seeking to improve college completion (Alemán, 2007; Diem et al, 2014; Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018; Iverson, 2007). Unlike traditional forms of policy analysis which assume a rational-scientific framework, CPA takes as a starting point the idea that policies are inherently biased and value-laden (Bacchi, 2000). CPA foregrounds dimensions such as race or gender in the analysis of policy and attempts to uncover issues of power, social reproduction, racism or sexism (Young & Diem, 2017). When utilized within the context of educational policy studies, CPA focuses on five fundamental concerns:

1. Attention must be paid to the difference between the policy rhetoric and practiced reality (Fischer, 2003; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009).
2. Focus must be placed on the policy, its roots, and its development (Burke, 2004).
3. Question the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge within the policy (Anyon, 1980; Levinson et al., 2009)
4. The broader effect of the policy and its role of contributing to the social stratification of minoritized populations by perpetuating inequities and maintaining power in dominant groups (Bernal, 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995; Riddell, 2005)
5. Emphasis on members of non-dominant groups such as racially minoritized communities who resist processes of domination and oppression (Gillborn, 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995) and who engage in activism to employ agency within schools (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Valenzuela & López, 2011).

Through this approach we bring awareness to the growing disparities in college completion amongst Latinx communities and the role states have in trying to address the barriers to educational attainment. Given our theoretical interests, we sought to understand the ways state

policies and attainment plans have been developed across the nation with a focus on *how* racial inequities are discussed, *if* any specific racial groups are identified, and the *ways* inequities in completion will be addressed (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). Particular interest is paid to the ways these attainment plans discuss, identify, and address the Latinx community given their population size in the US and the stark disparities faced in college completion.

Methods

With a focus on racial discourse in college completion policies, we utilized Critical Discourse Analysis (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, Fairclough, 1993; Marshall, 1999; Wodak, 1995) to examine the use of language in attainment plans. Coupled with CPA, Critical Discourse Analysis allows us to explore the language used in attainment plans and how race, racism, and racial disparities are highlighted or hidden in state documents related to improving attainment. This kind of discursive analysis has been used recently to examine state-level reforms related to admissions (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2014), college completion (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016), community college equity (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2019), and the ability of policymakers to include, or even foreground, race in their policy discussions. A qualitative, discursive approach to analyzing policy text and the underlying discourse related to improving attainment was well suited for our study and the research questions being asked (Yanow, 2000).

Procedures and Sampling Strategy

Currently, 43 states have developed an attainment plan to improve college completion (Jones & Berger, 2019). For this analysis, we developed a sample of states based on two criteria. The first criterion included the 10 states with the largest Latinx population. This decision used an “information-oriented” sampling strategy (Flyvberg, 2006) where we “maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases” (p. 34). Given the focus on the Latinx

community, we were interested in exploring states with large populations under the assumption that they may provide a greater emphasis on this group in their completion efforts. The second criterion included the 10 states with the largest disparities in college completion, the gap between the state average and Latinx community (See Table 1). This second criterion provided critical cases that help us understand how states may use attainment plans to not only improve completion in general, but also address known racial disparities. In total, our sample included 19 states with enacted college completion policies and attainment under implementation.

Table 1.
State Sample and Attainment Information

State	State Attainment Rate	Latinx Attainment Rate	Attainment Plan	Goal %	Goal Year	Gap Between Latinx and State Attainment Rate
Arizona	37.7	19	Yes	60	2030	-18.7
California	41.4	18.3	No	N/A	N/A	-23.1
Colorado*	49.7	22.2	Yes	66	2025	-27.5
Connecticut	48.8	23.1	Yes	70	2025	-25.7
Florida	39.9	34.2	Yes	55	2025	-5.7
Georgia	40	20.8	Yes	60	2025	-19.2
Idaho	38.6	12.7	Yes	60	2020	-25.9
Illinois*	45	20.4	Yes	60	2025	-24.6
Kansas	43.7	18.6	Yes	60	2020	-25.1
Kentucky	34.6	24.2	Yes	60	2030	-10.4
Massachusetts	53.2	24.6	Yes	60	2020	-28.6
Minnesota	50	23	Yes	70	2025	-27
Nebraska	45.2	15.2	No	N/A	N/A	-30
New Jersey	48.2	24.4	Yes	65	2025	-23.8
New Mexico	35.6	23.2	Yes	66	2030	-12.4
New York	47.3	26.6	No	N/A	N/A	-20.7
Rhode Island	44.8	20	Yes	60	2025	-24.8
Texas	37.2	19.7	Yes	60	2030	-17.5
Utah	43.5	18.2	Yes	66	2025	-25.3

Note. States with asterisk meet both sampling criteria

Data Collection

We drew our data from publicly available documents including legislative texts that established state completion goals, formal state attainment plans that articulated the priorities to

improve rates, and press releases that provided updates and progress reports over time. As Patton (2002) explained, “Multiple sources of information are sought and used because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective” (p. 244). This is especially resonant in educational policy research as multiple actors, policy interpretations, and contextual differences across institutions too often lead to varied implementation with differing outcomes for students. In total, we collected 120 unique documents between the 19 states in the sample, not including webpages and other online materials accessed. We organized our data by state and then by document type: legislative texts (LT), attainment plans (AP), and press releases and progress reports (PR). Initial data for this project was drawn between January and May 2019. Additional data and documents were collected during our analytic review process as we came across mentions of foundational text or other useful data that was hyperlinked in the initial set of documents. Within this context, we see attainment plans as the focal point since they are standalone documents that outline the priorities, strategies, and processes in which states move forward to achieve their college completion policy goals. Attainment plans provide the opportunity to understand the underlying motivations for increasing completion as well as understanding the mechanisms that drive improvement in educational attainment.

Analytic Strategy

Our data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, we developed an analytic tool to help us evaluate the state-level policy documents collected. Recent research (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018; Jones & Berger, 2019; Strunk, Marsh, Bush-Mecenas, & Duque, 2016) interested in the language and discourse of policy texts have employed analytic protocols to standardize their process. An analytic protocol allows the researcher to ground their work in their theoretical approach and construct a standard review process across multiple cases. Guided by Critical

Policy Analysis our protocol focused on interrogating the racial discourse of attainment plans and the ways that Latinx attainment disparity is framed as a problem of the individual or a responsibility of the state. To ensure consistency in our approach, we applied the protocol to a plan not included in our sample. When discussing this test case, we found that while we highlighted different aspects, our interpretations were sufficiently aligned and informed by our conceptual framework. We used this inter-rating meeting to revise the protocol and standardize our analysis process. Our final protocol focused on four areas: descriptive state-level information, structural elements, racial discourse, and feasibility of plan (See table below).

Table 2.

State Attainment Plan Protocol Elements

Focal Areas	Example Protocol Questions
State-level information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the state's attainment goal and achievement year? • Who is the coordinating body responsible for the attainment plan?
Structural elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the imperative for improving educational attainment in the state? • Do they have strategic goals to achieve their plan?
Racial discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the plan articulate specific approaches or strategies to address racial equity gaps for the Latinx community? • How does the state discuss its role in mitigating attainment disparities for the Latinx community? For example, does the state seem to take responsibility for the current conditions of their educational attainment?
Plan Feasibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on your review of the entire plan, would you say there is an overall, intentional, state-wide approach/strategy for improving college completion and mitigating racial disparities? • Are there dashboards or progress reports to see completion progress?

Our second stage focused on examining all the state attainment plans in our sample. With a finalized protocol, together we reviewed the college completion documents for one case. We then memoed our emerging insights, initial reactions, and recorded any other pertinent notes. From there we examined three cases simultaneously and then shared our individual analysis of the documents. After the second wave of review, we compared our use of the protocol and analytic process. After these steps to ensure standardization between us, we divided the remaining cases and independently examined the states we were assigned. The final stage encompassed a review of all states in the sample, where we examined analytic themes within individual cases and across all cases. This led us to create a “cross-case analysis” table that allowed us to compare the uniqueness and similarities in our sample (See Appendix B). From that comparison, we built and refined categories that helped us synthesize our analysis into findings that described how state attainment plans address Latinx disparities in completion.

Results

We present three themes that emerged during our analysis process. We begin by describing the way college completion initiatives take an “attainment for all” approach with an explicit economic imperative underlying their rationale for improvement. Then, in two subsections, we highlight how these documents frame inequity and the prevalent use of race-evasive language. We first report the discourse around attainment disparities and language used to avoid discussing racial disparities. We then describe the strategies for improvement within these plans and how they espouse an empty rhetoric or sustainable action for enhancing completion. Our final theme emphasizes the *Brown Paradox* (Contreras, 2011) showing how racial disparities for the Latinx community are largely ignored in state completion plans although their inequities in attainment are glaring and persistent. This *Brown Paradox* describes how

states have lofty aspirations for improving attainment, but fail to identify and address the needs of the Latinx community, the largest racial/ethnic group in the country, which also faces the highest gaps in college completion.

An Economic Imperative Prompting Attainment for All

As we reviewed attainment documents and completed our analysis it was evident that these plans were crafted with a priority on state workforce and economic development. Many states began their attainment plans discussing how these completion initiatives were a response to the recent recession, slowing economies, and growing international competition. States developed these plans to make sure that workforce development (i.e., credentialed residents) would have the necessary training, skills, and qualifications for the labor market in 2020 and beyond. In 2016, Governor Ducey of Arizona announced the state's formal attainment initiative, Achieve60AZ, sharing "We are working to keep our state competitive far into the future." He continued to describe how the attainment plan would be a benefit to the state and its economy:

Achieve60AZ [recognizes] the need for many more Arizonans to be prepared with the knowledge and skills they need to secure fulfilling jobs. Not only will this raise the standard of living for many individuals, it will attract more businesses to our great state and keep companies here thriving (Achieve60AZ, 2019).

This excerpt showcases the prevalent philosophy underlying state-level college completion goals and the strategies included in subsequent attainment plans. Arizona continued this economic imperative by explicitly discussing and visualizing the gains that the state could benefit by increasing attainment: "These gains equate to \$660,000 per college graduate, an excellent return on investment, as most reforms designed to increase attainment will likely cost significantly less" (College Attainment and the Economy, 2019). The Illinois attainment plan shared a similar economic influence: "It's not an overstatement to say that the economic success of our state, and our citizens, hinges on our progress toward this educational vision." The *Advance Illinois*

attainment plan continued, “With this report, we include interim targets to meet marketplace demands and achieve the state’s goal of 60% of Illinoisans with a postsecondary degree or credential by the year 2025” (Advance Illinois, 2016, p. 2). Arizona and Illinois were two of seven states in the study that developed attainment plans driven by economic concerns.

The other states were characterized as balancing “economic and social” benefits for residents and industry. States that articulated economic and social benefits for improving attainment included Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Texas. Introducing *Colorado Rises*, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education wrote:

If the state is to prepare its students for changing workforce demands while maintaining its high quality of life and vibrant economy, it must invest more in the educational attainment of all of its citizens. Failure to do so will result in entire segments of our population being left behind, increased social costs and reduced fiscal competitiveness (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2017).

Attainment plans like the one above included language that centered residents of the state by emphasizing the “high quality of life” and “social costs” impacted by college completion.

Similarly, Massachusetts articulated a balance between social and economic rationales stating, “the Commonwealth’s vision is to produce the best-educated citizenry and workforce in the nation; to compete effectively for jobs and sustain our rich civic life and cultural landscape” (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2014). Texas stood alone as a state that espoused social benefits in addition to economic ones. In the preamble to their “60x30” attainment effort they shared that “Higher education improves the lives of Texans” and that increasing attainment was about “education as civic mindedness and lifelong learning” They noted that workforce development is “one of many reasons to support expanding access and completion of higher education” (Texas Higher Education Coordination Board, 2015).

Attainment for All. In addition to the heavy discourse of economic incentives to improve completion, most states articulated plans and strategic goals for increasing attainment for “all residents.” Although each state listed several disparities in attainment based on race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location, there was limited discussion around completion goals for specific communities needing additional support to access and then complete postsecondary education. For example, one state shared, “[we] will be stronger by ensuring that many more *individuals* complete a postsecondary degree or credential, and that they graduate with the skills and abilities to be productive, engaged *citizens*.” Another added, “Too few *students* [in the state] are completing their education in a timely manner, if at all. Many are not prepared for college-level work when they arrive and are less likely [to] complete.” In response, state strategies included “ramp[ing] up advising and counseling services” or “recruit[ing] a more diverse teaching force [to] make higher education more inviting to the full range of potential undergraduate students.” These state policy goals, attainment plans, and the strategies within them all dodged explicit language, tending to use terms like “residents,” “students,” or “credential earners” rather than developing strategic goals that address and lift the rates for groups facing the greatest barriers to college completion, like the Latinx community. An attainment for all approach benefits the state and the economy, but ignores the longstanding gaps in college completion for racially minoritized communities. As one state put it, “[we] have the opportunity and ability to increase completion, and improve the economic prospects for all.”

The Framing of Inequity in College Attainment

Through our analytic process, patterns of discourse emerged related to how plans identified inequity and racial disparities in educational attainment. Our reporting of these

patterns is divided into two sections, first describing the discourse around attainment and then sharing the ways language is used to discuss the action taken by states in their attainment plans.

The language and discourse of inequity. When states identified and described inequity, we uncovered three patterns of discourse: deficit-based, race-evasive, or race-conscious. **Deficit-based** discourse included blaming specific groups for the inequities faced or comparing high-performing groups with other communities. For example, one state shared:

Ample opportunity to postsecondary education has not produced equal rates of participation. *Low income students do not go to college* at the same rate as more financially advantaged students, *neither do underrepresented minority students*, students from rural regions, or non-traditional adult students [emphasis added].

This excerpt shows how a state may place the blame on individual students for the level of achievement, since the state has provided “ample opportunity” for success in higher education, but students – low-income, racially minoritized, rural, and adult reentry – have not produced equitable outcomes. The quote also illustrates how states compare “success” between groups and tend to blame low-income or racially minoritized communities for the inequitable rates produced without acknowledging the sociocultural differences in resources and experiences faced by “low-income” and “financially advantaged” students. Other states included a similar deficit-oriented framing when discussing inequities in college completion:

Students from underrepresented groups such as students of color and first-generation students, *may acquire less college knowledge as compared to peers*. Students who belong to communities that *do not historically have a college-going culture or do not have family members or role models* who have graduated from college, often do not gain access to meaningful college planning and preparation [emphasis added].

Inherent in attainment plans is the improvement of college completion in states. What we have identified are ways that some states frame inequities experienced as a direct result of the communities themselves, their value for education, college-going culture, and role models, or lack thereof. Our analysis uncovered both deficit-based language as well as deficit-based

ideologies on what causes educational inequities and the role of the state in increasing college completion for specific communities facing significant gaps in attainment.

A second way of framing inequity in state attainment plans was using “**race-evasive**” discourse where states used veiled language to discuss and describe the completion disparities faced by racially minoritized communities. We chose to use the term “race-evasive” to describe the reluctance in state policymaking, and broader society, to discuss issues of race and ways to eradicate racial inequity in attainment. This phrase also moves away from ableist terms such as “mute” or “blind,” which are real disabilities in society (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017). Race-evasiveness in the context of state completion policies is the belief that race (structural racism) does not matter or should not be considered as a factor when thinking of causes of inequity in educational attainment (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Pollock, 2004; Wells, 2014). The use of umbrella terms such as “diverse students,” “underrepresented students,” “minorities,” and “those facing equity gaps” perpetuated this race-evasive approach. For example, one state shared, “To make meaningful progress toward the [Completion Initiative] goal, the state must improve completion rates—particularly for historically underserved students—at [State’s] public colleges and universities.” In their attainment plan, they included figures and tables that visualized the racial disparities in college completion, but the accompanied language focused on supporting “historically underserved” populations. This was mirrored in another state attainment plan displaying graphs that showed the “gaps” in graduation for “minority students.” Beyond the visualization, there were no words to provide context, additional information, or a description of what “minority” referred to in this context. This second discursive framing points to the erasure of racial disparities and the ways that attainment plans presented data based on race, but evaded discussion around the causes of inequity or the role of the state in closing them.

The third discourse pattern, **race-conscious**, was limited in our analysis. Only a few states like Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Texas used explicit language to describe and discuss racial disparities. These states were also ones to frame inequity using phrases such as “equity gaps” and “racial inequality.” Colorado, provided an example of a state that identified racial disparities as well as acknowledged their role in mitigating them:

Almost one-third of Colorado’s adult population lacks education of any type after high school. Moreover, attainment levels are not equal: Only 29 percent of Hispanics, our fastest-growing population, and 39 percent of African Americans have a certificate or degree, as compared to 64 percent for the white majority...[We] have made erasing these equity gaps a top priority (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2017).

Similarly, Minnesota’s attainment plan, described their need to “identify, tailor, and implement effective strategies to increase postsecondary enrollment, retention and completion rates for communities of color.” They added: “the next 10 years provides a critical opportunity to address these challenges early, ensuring that Minnesota remains a national education and economic leader” (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, p. 10). Of the states to use race-conscious language in their framing of college completion, Colorado stood out as the only state to list “erasing equity gaps” specifically for the Latinx community as one of their strategic priorities. Highlighting the type of discourse and language used in attainment plans to discuss racial inequity was important; some states used deficit-language, others evaded the mention of race in trying to improve college completion. Our final theme explores how state attainment plans move from identifying and describing racial disparities to creating explicit strategies and interventions to address the racial equity gaps.

The Brown Paradox in the Aspirations of Attainment

Our final theme draws attention to the *Brown Paradox* in college completion. Through the term, Contreras (2011) highlighted the contradiction between the dramatic increase of the

Latinx population and the significant gap they experience in educational achievement (p. 2). In our analysis, we found a similar *Brown Paradox* where state-level policies and attainment plans were crafted to improve completion without acknowledging the magnitude of the Latinx community, either in population size or disparity gap. This is especially concerning as our study sample included 78% of the entire Latinx population in the United States as well as states with the largest gaps in completion for this group. As we have described above, most plans sought to improve completion for all residents without regard to racial disparities. Although some states did use race-conscious language to highlight glaring gaps in completion for the Latinx community, that does not necessarily mean that their plan included strategies or interventions to mitigate the disparities described. States have developed legislative goals and articulated attainment plans that espouse lofty goals to be achieved in the next few years with little to no attention placed on the racial disparities that will hinder any progress towards the goals of increased college completion. Of the states examined, we found two responses to the *Brown Paradox*: empty rhetoric and promising plans.

Empty Rhetoric. This sub-theme describes the ways that attainment plans identify and highlight the inequities for the Latinx community without addressing any barriers they specifically face when proposing solutions or interventions to improve college completion. For example, Massachusetts posed a question in their plan: “Consider this: If African American and Latino/a adults possessed college degrees at the same rate as white adults (60%), the state would easily meet its need for more college graduates by 2025” (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2014, p.9). Although the plan clearly identifies racial disparities, the subsequent pages in their plan do not list or discuss any specific mechanisms to improve completion for the Latinx community. Arizona included a heavy discussion of the gaps the Latinx community faces

and the potential economic benefits to the state if their rates improved. As a state, Arizona has one of the largest Latinx communities and a sizable gap (-18.7%) between the state average attainment and the Latinx rate. In their completion documents they shared, “Unless we enable more Latinos to graduate high school, enroll in postsecondary certificate or degree programs and complete those programs, Arizona will struggle to raise its overall attainment rate to a competitive level” (Achieve60AZ, 2019, p. 3). This plan continues to list “the importance of increasing Latino attainment” for the sake of the prosperity of the state, which will benefit all Arizonans. As with Massachusetts, Arizona’s Achieve60AZ specifically acknowledges the minoritized populations and the gaps they face in their plan, but do not then utilize this knowledge to create any specific strategies for these populations.

A Glimmer of Hope. It is important to note, that there were a few examples of states that did discuss and include explicit goals and strategies to address disparities facing Latinx students. The closest thing to crafting a race-conscious attainment plan where the inequities identified were aligned with the proposed solutions came from Colorado and Texas. For example, in Colorado their state-wide completion rate stands at 49.7%, while the Latinx community is at 22%, nearly a 28-percentage point gap between the two (Table 1). In their attainment plan, *Colorado Rises*, they sought to increase completion rates to 66% for all groups by 2025. One of their four strategic priorities included “eras[ing] equity gaps for the largest and fastest-growing ethnic group, Hispanic/Latino,” which also had “the lowest average educational attainment and the lowest college enrollment rate of any ethnic group in the state” (p. 3). Their attainment plan described strategies such as “improv[ing] college outreach to Hispanic communities” or providing more support in two-year colleges to “address[ing] transfer barriers for Hispanic/Latino students” to help move the community from an attainment rate of 29% in 2017

to 60% in 2025 (p. 3). They reaffirmed this priority by stating that the Colorado Commission for Higher Education “have made erasing these equity gaps—including for our fast-growing Hispanic population—a top priority” (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2017, p. 16). Texas was the only state to provide “goals and benchmarks” specifically for the Latinx community to help achieve their overall goal of improving completion to 60% by 2030. They noted that Latinx completion needed to increase by 138,000 in 2020, 198,000 in 2025, and 285,000 in 2030 and acknowledged that these targets “will help increase parity across completers for groups that have traditionally been underrepresented” in the state (Texas Higher Education Coordination Board, 2015, p. 19). As noted in their 60x30 plan, “Without bold action” that address the “Hispanic community, Texas faces a future of diminished incomes, opportunities, and resources” (p. v). These two states displayed bold action by not only identifying inequities for the Latinx community, but also using race-conscious language in their discourse, creating specific strategies to improve completion, and setting specific completion targets to track progress towards their attainment goals.

Discussion and Implications

As policymakers continue to enact state-level college completion policies and attainment plans, we interrogated the language and discourse embedded in these reforms. Using Critical Policy Analysis, we examined the approach of 19 states to identify, address, and improve the postsecondary educational attainment of their citizens. In particular, we focused on the ways the Latinx community in these states are discussed and included given their population size (US Census, ACS, 2019) and the well-documented disparities they face in attainment. This study advances our general understanding of college completion policies and the specific ways that

plans attempt, if at all, to address racial disparities in attainment, especially for the Latinx community. Our findings highlighted three critical aspects to college completion and the racial disparities within them: the imperative behind improving completion (primarily economic), the language used to highlight and discuss inequities faced by the Latinx community (primarily race-evasive), and the type of strategies included to improve Latinx completion within these states.

Who Benefits from these State-level Attainment Plans?

After conducting our analysis, we asked ourselves: who do these attainment plans benefit? Reading through the pages of these plans, the discourse around college completion and its improvement focused on the economic benefits to the state. Our findings highlighted language that described increasing attainment as a lever for strengthening state workforce and economic growth. Studying Texas' completion initiative, Mansfield and Thachik (2016) described how policymakers crafted their attainment plan to appeal to "economic interests" and prompt the urgency of improving rates to address a "workforce shortage...to fill jobs in the new economy" (p. 3). Our study aligns with recent work describing how policymakers' use of educational reform for economic interests (Gandara & Hearn, 2019; Ness, Tandberg, & McLendon, 2015). We found that most attainment plans were undergirded by an economic imperative; a few included economic and social/individual benefits.

We see the potential for perpetuating disparities in attainment, when completion initiatives are solely developed as a means to achieve economic security. This approach tends to think of improving college completion in the aggregate, focused on the number of additional credentials produced or increasing the overall rate of completion in the state. Doing so creates a false notion that increasing attainment in general will also benefit communities that have faced significant barriers to college completion. Recent research (Ching, Felix, Fernandez Castro, &

Trinidad, 2018) finds that policies working to increase “success for all” tend to take a “rising tide, lifts all boats” approach and fail to recognize underlying systemic inequities such as unequal school funding, social stratification, or institutional racism (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015).

Lacking race-conscious discourse, are attainment plans able to address racial disparities?

Taking a critical approach to interpreting the aims and intent of attainment plans, we uncovered the inability of these efforts to discuss race, identify racial disparities, or appropriately propose strategies to improve completion rates for communities of color. This is especially true for the largely omitted Latinx community, which faces the greatest levels of inequity when it comes to attainment across the nation and within most individual states. Our work finds that what a plan *aspires* to achieve and the *actual* strategies, resources, and efforts developed are misaligned. As Mansfield and Thachik (2016) described in their work, attainment policies and plans seeking to close “gaps” fail to do so because policymakers “fall short of addressing systemic inequities” (p. 1) that create and perpetuate racial disparities in college completion.

Attainment plans hoping to improve college completion miss the mark when they do not acknowledge the disparities within communities of color or when they do discuss, fall short of taking action on the highlighted inequities in educational attainment. This mirrors recent work by Jones and Berger (2019) highlighting how states take “preliminary steps in acknowledging the existence of racial equity gaps,” but are unable to propose concrete goals, benchmarks, or strategies to close the disparities (p. 3). In trying to address disparities based on race, Carter and colleagues (2017) shared that policymakers “can’t address, what they can’t see” and must begin to acknowledge the historical nature of inequity, role of race and racism, and the need to “talk about and act” on racial disparities (p. 207). Race-evasive completion initiatives may have potentially detrimental effects when they do not acknowledge sociocultural and historical

dynamics that hinder specific communities from accessing and completing postsecondary education (Felix & Trinidad, 2019). As these plans move forward and progress, it is necessary for states to acknowledge racial disparities in attainment and create specific strategies to address the barriers faced by certain communities in completing college.

What can be learned from this analysis to mitigate racial gaps in attainment?

The call for increased completion has been set to 60% across all adults in the United States. For some racial groups, White and Asian¹, the drive to improvement may not be too unrealistic. For communities of color that face greater barriers to success, the goal of 60% is unattainable without the addressing systemic issues facing these communities. State policymakers and system leaders must include a specific and targeted focus on communities of color. As Gandara and Hearn (2019) note, there is limited “systemic research evidence” on college completion policies and their ability to improve attainment in the aggregate and much less knowledge on the impact to racial/ethnic communities (p. 27). While states continue to enact and implement completion initiatives, it is necessary to discuss what seems to work and might be effective in improving attainment.

Some states, like Colorado, Texas, and Massachusetts provide some promising practices to support racially minoritized groups within their college completion initiatives. Colorado’s attainment plan was the only one to craft a strategic priority that focused on erasing equity gaps in the state. The document explicitly outlined the need to address the Latinx population as they are the largest group in the state and face the lowest attainment rate. Texas’ acknowledged the need to address the number of Latinx completers in the state and clearly outlined the number of

¹ US Census data used by Lumina, Ed Trust, and other national organizations do not include disaggregated data for the Asian category, so groups like South East Asian or Pacific Islander who experiences greater barriers to educational attainment are grouped into this higher rate.

additional certificates and degrees required by 2020, 2025 and 2030 to achieve their attainment goal. Similarly, Massachusetts used race-conscious language throughout their attainment plan to describe the urgency and priority of supporting Black and Latinx adults in achieving a college degree. Without attention to racial disparities and the mechanisms that can mitigate them, these attainment plans will not achieve their intent of improving college completion.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Findings from our work revealed the lack of discussion around racial disparities, the inability to identify the glaring gaps facing communities of color, and the ways that most strategies seeking to improve completion focus on all students, rendering the barriers and needs of racial groups invisible. As completion dates near and pass for many of these state attainment plans, we draw recommendations from our work to help shift existing policies and strategies to be more intentional and explicit in addressing racial disparities and improving completion with the Latinx community in mind. Therefore, the following recommendations are provided to aid state-level policymakers who develop legislation as well as those overseeing the implementation of attainment plans to include concrete initiatives that can reduce Latinx attainment gaps.

Explicitly name racial equity gaps in attainment and discuss the state- and system-level barriers that maintain these disparities. The attainment plans that were reviewed for this project highlight the confusing narrative that describes the lack of attainment by specific racial groups, yet the plans are not explicit in how state specific efforts, and even systemic level barriers, impact students within their educational systems. States like Minnesota started this necessary work by acknowledging “the populations growing the fastest have historically not been adequately served within Minnesota’s educational system” (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2016, p. 2). We recommend that states like Minnesota continue this acknowledgment

and also further the discussion for how the state and system have been complicit in arriving at the reality today where not all students are adequately served.

Develop attainment priorities that identify racial/ethnic communities and propose interventions that are race-specific and not generalized. While the development of state attainment plans encourages the expanding college access, there needs to be a motivated effort to identify racial equity gaps in order to propose solutions to close them that are specific by race, instead of generalizing the educational experience. Colorado is one such state that is attempting to do this. Colorado's plan acknowledged that completion for the Latinx community is at 22% and then described specific efforts such as, "improving outreach to Hispanic communities" and providing more support at the community college level to "address transfer barriers for Hispanic/Latino students" (Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 2017). This intentional acknowledgement of the specific rate for Latinx students supported by measurable metrics make this something that the researchers hope to see emulated by more states.

Clear goal setting with targets and milestones that track and highlight attainment progress for racial/ethnic groups. Third, we discuss the need for states to continue being explicit in their efforts and to highlight specific goals for different populations that will further aid in achieving the proposed attainment rate. In Texas' 60x2030 plan, they included "goals and benchmarks" specifically for Latinx students. This plan noted that Texas needs to increase the amount of Latinx students completing their education by 138,000 in 2020, 198,000 in 2025, and 285,000 by 2030. Adoption of similar metrics will be instrumental in plans being able to reach their goals for attainment.

Establish accountability and reporting mechanisms to keep the public informed of the state-level progress in attainment and college completion. Finally, we ask that individuals

tasked with creating these plans make conscious decisions around accountability and reporting mechanisms to share plan progress and keep the public informed of the changes in attainment and college completion. Massachusetts espoused efforts to do this and did so in the four-years after the attainment plan was instituted. However, after 2016, the updates from the state ended. It would be of great value to understand how this conversation has continued and how the needle has shifted in the three years since the last update was released. This study and these recommendations can be instrumental for the individuals who are tasked with creating daunting state attainment plans to impact not only entire systems, but all of the individuals within the state. As these efforts continue being developed and implemented by states, we hope to see these recommendations utilized to create specific, meaningful, and tangible plans that truly change the experience for students in the United States.

Conclusion

Examining over a third of the nation's state-level completion efforts, this study provides insight into the discourse of policies, goals, and plans attempting to improve educational attainment. In particular, this study looked at how the Latinx population is acknowledged and addressed in these state policy goals for increasing postsecondary attainment. Importance was placed on the Latinx population as they have been one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in this country since the 1990s and have the lowest levels of educational attainment across the nation. We find a lack of race-consciousness, where states fail to acknowledge prevalent racial disparities as well as offer strategies that seek to increase completion rates overall, without developed interventions or mechanisms that close gaps within racial/ethnic groups. As policymakers, university systems, and institutional leaders move forward with improving completion it is necessary to acknowledge racial disparities and take action through explicit

strategies, if any aspirations of attainment are to be realized. These policies and attainment goals become just words when they fail to recognize the historic and current barriers that racially-minoritized students face in postsecondary education, especially within the Latinx community.

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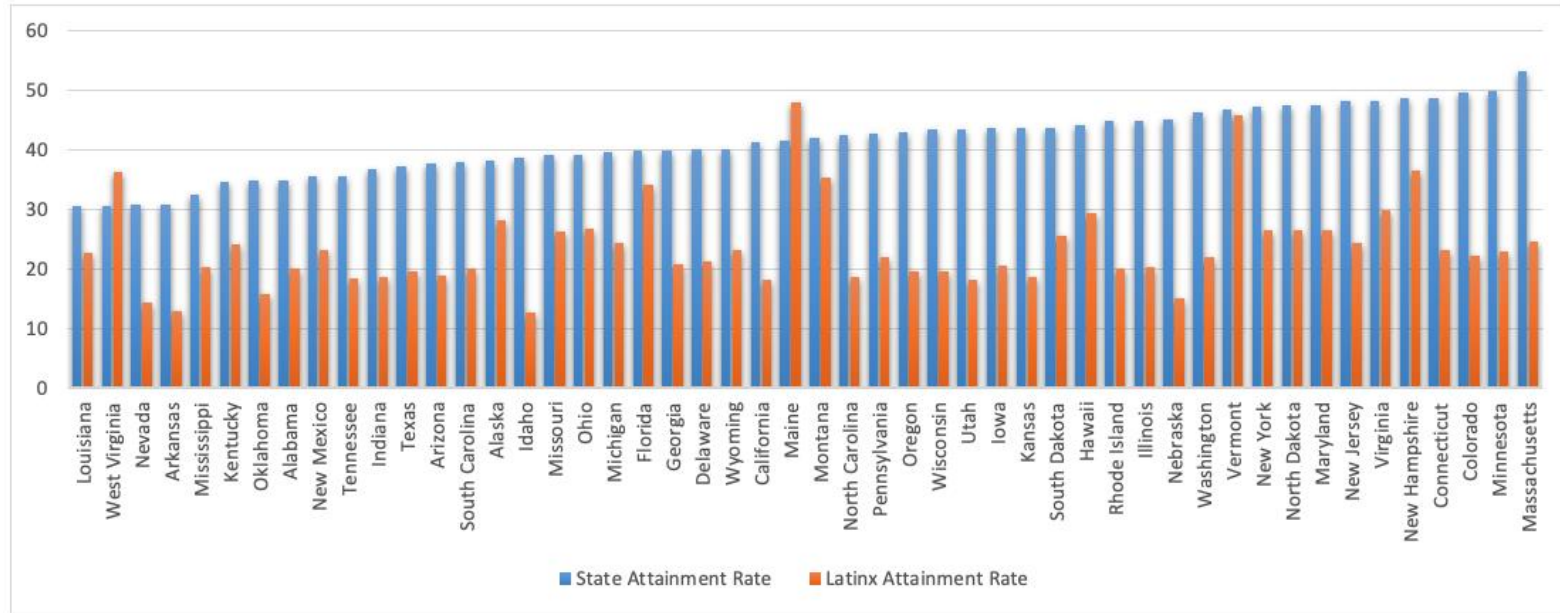
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Appendix A: US College Completion by State, Average and Latinx Education Attainment Rates



Appendix B: Cross-Case Analysis of State-Level Attainment Plans

State	Structural Elements			Racial Discourse			Feasibility		
	Completion Imperative	Strategic goals included?	Status of Plan Since Adoption	Does their plan include racial discourse?	Do strategies and goals include racial discourse?	Is the Latinx community prioritized?	Is the plan feasible to achieve?	Can the plan address racial disparities?	Can attainment goal progress be tracked?
Arizona	Primarily Economic	Yes	Living	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
California*									
Colorado	Economic and Social	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Connecticut	Economic and Social	Yes	Static	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Florida	Primarily Economic	No	Static	No	No	No	No	No	No
Georgia	Primarily Economic	No	Static	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Idaho	Economic and Social	Yes	Static	No	No	No	No	No	No
Illinois	Primarily Economic	Yes	Living	No	No	No	Yes	Unclear	No
Kansas	Economic and Social	Yes	Living	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Kentucky	Economic and Social	Yes	Living	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Massachusetts	Primarily Economic	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Minnesota	Economic and Social	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	No
Nebraska*									
New Jersey	Economic and Social	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Unclear	No
New Mexico	Primarily Economic	No	Static	No	No	No	No	No	No
New York*									
Rhode Island	Primarily Economic	Yes	Living	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Texas	Economic and Social	Yes	Living	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes
Utah	Economic and Social	Yes	Living	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

Note. States with asterisk do not have an existing college completion policy or attainment plan